Headache

What is a headache?

"Headache" is a term used to describe pain in any part of your head. It is one of the most common health complaints. Most of the time, headaches are not serious. They are often triggered by things like stress, certain foods, alcohol or being tired. Sometimes, though, headaches can be a symptom of eye problems.

There are many different causes of headaches.

Talk about your migraine symptoms with your ophthalmologist when you have an eye exam.

Tension headaches

The most common cause of headaches is when muscles in the scalp and neck tighten. This type of headache is called a tension headache. You may feel pressure or dull pain in your forehead and temples, around your eyes, or in your neck.

Some people assume that the neck pain causes your head to hurt. Instead, it is more likely that the tension headache makes your neck hurt.

Feeling nervous, tense and anxious, or being tired or depressed can lead to muscle tightness and pain. Other things that can give you a tension headache include:

- sleeping or sitting in an uncomfortable position
- reading or doing other close-up tasks
- clenching your jaw or grinding your teeth while sleeping
- chewing gum

Most tension headaches go away within a few hours, but there is a chronic type of tension headache that may last for months. Many people find relief from non-prescription pain relievers. Talk with your doctor if you get tension headaches often.

Migraine headaches

Migraine headaches are another common type of headache. Migraines can be more severe than tension headaches. This type of headache has throbbing pain, often on one side of the head. The pain lasts for hours to several days, and gets worse when you move.

Many people with migraines will have visual symptoms before having the pain. These symptoms can include seeing zigzag lines, shimmering or colored lights, or flashes of light in one side of your vision. This is called a migraine aura. You can also have the visual aura without the pain.

With migraine headaches, you may be sensitive to light, sound and smells. You may also feel sick to your stomach or you may throw up.

It is not clear exactly how a migraine works. But doctors think it may be related to changes in a chemical in your brain called serotonin. When these changes occur, blood vessels in the brain tighten.

Migraine facts

Migraine headaches affect at least 1 out of 10 people.

- They happen more often to women than men.
- Migraines can run in families, and can affect both adults and young children.
- People who have migraines often have a history of motion sickness.

Many people notice that certain things trigger a migraine. Triggers can include:

- certain foods, such as red wine, aged cheeses and chocolate
- chemicals added to foods, such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), nitrates and nitrites (used in hot dogs and other processed meats) and artificial sweeteners (like NutraSweet®)
- sleep problems (too much or too little sleep, or irregular sleep patterns)
- hormone changes (such as menstruation or pregnancy in women)
- stress, anxiety, or other emotional problems
- lights, temperature changes, or smells.

There are prescription and nonprescription pain medicines to help relieve migraine headache pain. Also, it can help to know your migraine triggers. Try keeping notes about what you did just before a migraine started. Keep track of what you ate, how well you slept, and any other factors that may have triggered your headache. Then avoid these triggers as much as you can.

If you have migraines frequently, talk with your doctor about treatment options.

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Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches are less common than tension headaches or migraines. With a cluster headache, you have severe pain on one side of your head. You may have watery or red eyes on that same side of the head. You may also feel sweaty and have a runny nose.

Cluster headaches can start suddenly and last from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Many people have a cluster headache every day for a month or two. This can happen several times within a year. Men are more likely than women to get them.

If you suffer from cluster headaches, talk with your doctor. He or she may prescribe medication or recommend nonprescription medicine.

Poor vision causing headaches in kids? Probably not.

Parents often assume that poor vision causes their child's headaches. But research says otherwise.

One study showed that vision or eye problems are rarely the cause of kids' headaches, even when headaches occur during visual tasks like homework. The findings showed that there was no significant link between children's frequent headaches and a need for glasses.

Follow-up reports from parents showed that headaches improved in 75% (3 out of 4) of the kids. And their headaches were equally likely to improve whether or not they got a new prescription for glasses.

Headaches and eye problems

Eye strain is when your eyes get tired from using them intensely for a long time. Reading, doing close work or looking at a computer are common causes. Headaches and blurry vision can be symptoms of eye strain. To help, rest your eyes by taking regular breaks using the "20-20-20" rule. Rest your eyes every 20 minutes by looking at an object at least 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds.

Diseases of the eye are one of the least common causes of headaches. But some serious eye problems can have headaches and vision changes as symptoms.

Angle-closure glaucoma is where fluid in the front part of the eye is suddenly blocked from draining out of the eye as it should. Eye pressure rises quickly. Symptoms include headache and severe pain in the eyes or above them. Other symptoms include feeling sick to your stomach and changes in your vision. This is a medical emergency. You should seek help right away if you have these symptoms.

Giant cell arteritis (GCA) is swelling in the arteries that run along your temple and usually occurs in older people. Blood supply to the eye is reduced, causing decreased vision and a constant, throbbing pain in the temples. It also causes scalp tenderness. GCA is a medical emergency and needs to be treated right away to prevent vision loss in both eyes.

One of the most serious causes of headaches with vision changes is **stroke**. This is when blood flow to the brain is reduced or blocked. Stroke signs include a severe headache with a droopy eyelid, and possibly double vision. Get medical help right away if you have these symptoms.

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Headaches can be caused by many diseases and disorders affecting other parts of the body. Some conditions that can cause headaches include:

- ear problems
- jaw problems
- sinus problems
- arthritis
- high blood pressure
- nerve diseases
- blood vessel disease
- tumors
- aneurysms (when a weak blood vessel fills with blood and bulges)

Figure out what causes your headaches

Tell your doctor if you get headaches often, or if you get very bad headaches. He or she will ask about your symptoms and medical history, and will examine you. You may also need certain tests to help find out what is causing your headaches.

How your headaches will be treated depends on their cause. If it appears that your headaches are caused by eye problems, you may be referred to an eye care provider.

Summary

Headache, or pain in any part of your head, is very common. Most of the time, it is not serious. They are often triggered by things like stress, certain foods, alcohol or being tired. There are many different kinds of headaches, including tension, cluster and migraine headaches. All of these can be treated with medicine.

Occasionally, headaches can be a symptom of eye problems. Angle-closure glaucoma and diseases of the blood vessels feeding the eyes can cause headaches. Stroke can cause severe headache and a droopy eyelid. Get medical help right away if you have these symptoms.

Your doctor can help find out what is causing your headaches and recommend treatment.

Get more information about migraines from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at **aao.org/headache-link**.

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